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ABSTRACT

This study addresses two central issues regarding father involvement in dual earner families using infant day care: (1) Which people are with an infant over the course of a day and which perform key child caregiving tasks? and (2) Are structural and emotional factors in the family associated with father involvement? A total of 41 infants from 3 day care centers in Central Pennsylvania were studied. Data were gathered on demographic and background characteristics, structural variables, child care arrangements, family environment, and father involvement. Findings indicated that parents of infants in day care spent almost three-fourths of the infant's waking hours caring for and being with the infant. Fathers spent more time and engaged in more caregiving tasks than in previously reported studies of single earner households. Father involvement was associated not only with the number of hours the child was in day care, but also with measures of the emotional and structural climate of the family. Traditional demographic features such as occupational status and sex of the child were not related to father involvement. It is concluded that the most significant thing about infants in dual earner families is that the structure and operation of their families differs from those of single earner families. (RH)

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LINKS BETWEEN INFANT DAY CARE AND FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: CARE ARRANGEMENTS AND THE ROLE OF THE FATHER

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INTRODUCTION

The following study addresses two key issues with respect to father involvement in dual earner families using infant day care. First, it draws a descriptive picture of who the infant is with over the course of a day and who performs key child caregiving tasks. Second, it addresses the question of whether structural and emotional factors within the family are associated with father involvement.

Past studies have suggested that infants in day care may be at risk for poor socio-emotional outcomes in later childhood (Belsky & Rovine, 1988). Recent work by Howes (1990) suggests that quality of non-parental care in the first year of life may be a more important predictor of social and emotional adjustment than the use of day care per se. Independent of these arguments, it is generally assumed that infants in full-time day care spend most of their waking hours away from their parents. Debates about the issue of non-parental care need to be placed in the context of how infants in families using day care actually spend their days.

Studies of fathers have reported minimal to moderate father involvement in caring for children and have suggested factors connected with such involvement. For instance, Ninio & Rinott (1988) reported fathers of nine-month-olds in Israel were involved in one child care task per day and had sole responsibility for their infants once every ten days. In contrast, Lamb et al. (1988) reported that fathers of 16-month-olds in Sweden had sole responsibility for their infants 1.38 hours per day and spent about fifty

minutes per day in child care activities. Factors reported to be related to father involvement in child caregiving have differed as well. Crouter et al. (1987) reported that dual earner fathers were more involved with their infants than single earner fathers but that dual earner fathers also reported higher levels of negative marital interaction. On the other hand, an Israeli study by Levy-Shiff and Israelashvili (1988) found, in a mixed sample of dual and single earner families, that marital satisfaction and happiness were related to positive father involvement during infancy. A consistent finding has been that mother's work schedule and time at work are strong predictors of father involvement (Barnett & Baruch, 1987).

METHOD

SUBJECTS - The 41 infants (22 male, 19 female) in this study were drawn from a larger project examining health and day care. Subjects were from three day care centers in Central Pennsylvania. One center was an on-site program for employees of a large health care facility. The second was a single site, for-profit center, while the third was operated by a community non-profit on the grounds of a university, but serving the wider community. All mothers were employed full-time outside the home although the number of hours in day care varied from 8 to 50 hours per week. Average age of entry into day care was 4.2 months and all but two children entered day care before one year of age. Below are additional characteristics of the sample.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Occupation

Fathers	
unskilled/skilled	51%
semi-professional/professional	49%
Mothers	
unskilled/skilled	46%
semi-professional/professional	54%

Income

Mean - $44,950 Range - $11,000 - $100-000

OTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Average age of fathers		35 yrs.
Average age of mothers		32 yrs.
Average age of children		15 mo.
Family size -	one child	59%
	two children	29%
	more than two children	12%
Average weekday time away from home		
Fathers		9.7 hrs.
Mothers		9.4 hrs.

MEASURES

A family interview was conducted with the mother in the parents' home.

STRUCTURAL VARIABLES - The mother was asked to report on a typical weekday for the child. Information included daily schedules for parents and child as well as who handled various caregiving tasks. Similar information was gathered for a typical weekend.

CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS - Included how much time the child spent in various care arrangements (day care, mother, father, others). Similar information was collected for a typical weekend. Day care teachers provided estimates of nap time from which waking time at day care was calculated.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT - Measured using the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1974). Subscales used in these analyses were those comprising the system-maintenance dimension (*organization, control*) and relationship dimension (*cohesion, expressiveness, conflict*).

FATHER INVOLVEMENT - *Father time* is the number of hours per day father was alone with the child. *Father caregiving* consists of the total number of caregiving tasks which father performed fifty percent of the time or more. Tasks included waking child, dressing child, eating with child, driving child to or from day care, putting child to bed, and soothing child who wakes at night.

RESULTS

1. DEMOGRAPHICS

- There is no significant relationship between father's educational level and either father caregiving or father time.

- There is no significant relationship between sex of child and either father caregiving or father time.

- There is no significant relationship between age of child and either father caregiving or father time.

2. CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS AND TASKS

- Fathers spend an average of 1.3 hours per day (range 0 - 5) as exclusive caregivers of their children.

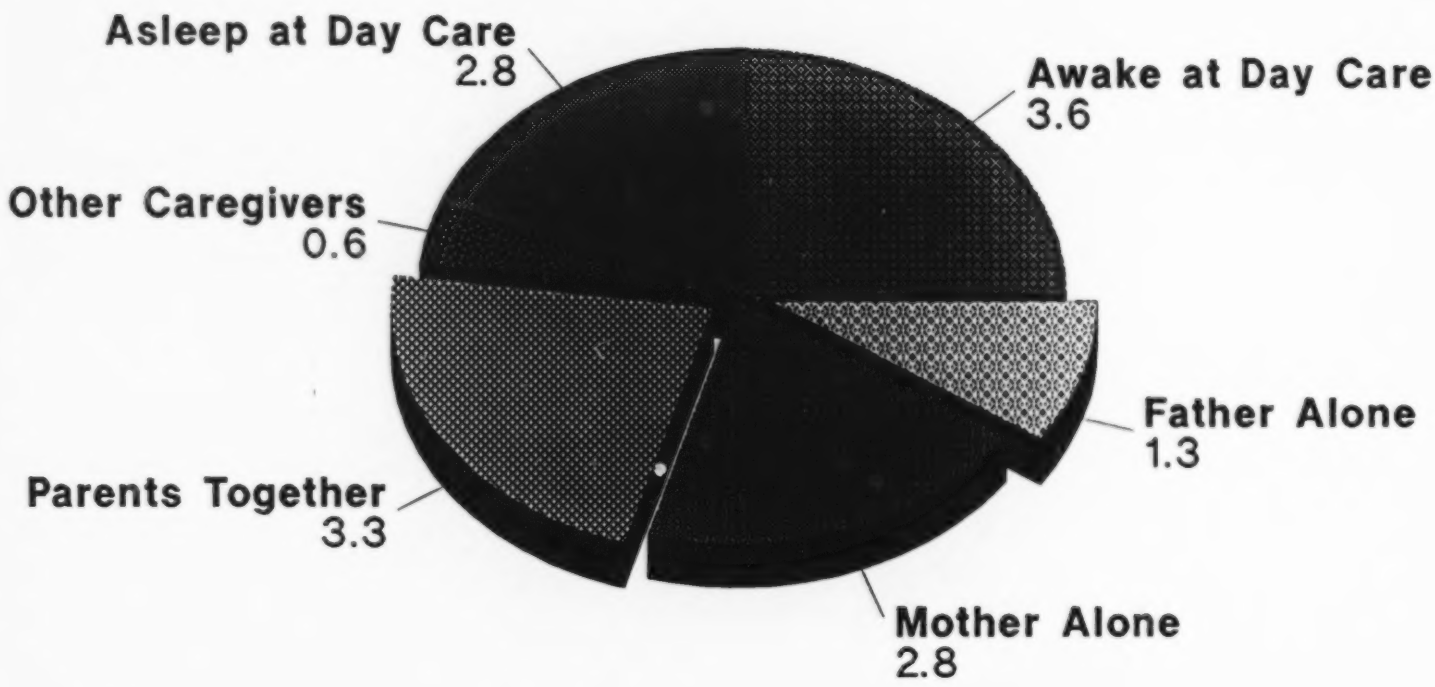
- Fathers perform 1.8 (range 0 - 5) caregiving tasks for every 5.3 (range 3 - 7) caregiving tasks performed by mothers.

- There is no relationship between father time as exclusive caregiver and the number of caregiving tasks performed.

- Hours per week in day care is positively associated with father caregiving (chi-sq. 3.776, $p < .05$).

Weekday Child Care Arrangements

(hours per day)



Total child waking hours per day (includes daytime naps) – 14.4.
Average number of nonparental care hours per weekend – 1.7.

3. FAMILY EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

- Family cohesion is positively associated with father caregiving (chi-sq. 4.188, p <.04) but not with father time.

- Family organization is negatively associated with father caregiving (chi-sq. 4.533, p <.03) but not with father time.

- Of fathers who spend two hours or more per day as exclusive caregivers of children, those doing fewer caregiving tasks have wives reporting significantly higher levels of conflict (chi-sq. 11.00, p <.001). There is no significant difference for fathers who spend less than two hours per day as exclusive caregivers of their children.

DISCUSSION

This study presents several important finding which place infant day care in a somewhat different context than previously. First, parents of infants in day care are spending almost three quarters of the infant's waking hours caring for and being with the infant. In addition, fathers are spending more time and engaging in more caregiving tasks than in previously reported studies of single earner households.

Second, father involvement is associated not only with number of hours the child is in day care but also with measures of the emotional and structural climate of the family. Traditional demographic features such as occupational status, and sex of the child were not related to father involvement.

It may be that the most significant thing about infants in dual earner families is not that they are in day care but that the structure and operation of their homes is different than for those of single earner families. It is intriguing to consider what the effects of these structural and operational differences may be. As data collection continues there will be an opportunity to examine the relationship between these factors and a number of child outcomes.